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ABSTRACT

Adult education theory and practice has long been involved in identifying spaces where counter-hegemonic learning can take place. Civil society is regarded as the site par-excellence for providing space in which to learn free from power and domination and from the state and economy. Another dimension to the recent focus on civil society as a site for learning and social change is the crisis of socialism and social democracy, both political movements derived from the Marxist tradition. Civil society has historically been situated in relation to the state (political society) and the market (economic society) as found in the writings of Cicero, Hobbes, Ferguson and Smith. Modern conceptions of civil society--particularly those of Marx, Gramsci, Habermas, Cohen and Arato were based in Hegel's work. Learning in civil society can have distinct objectives. The traditional socialist objective is transformation of capitalism; radical democracy's objective is furtherance of democratic practices. These aims share a belief that modern society is characterized by conflict. For socialists, conflict is between classes; for radical democrats, conflict is between these two forms of societal integration: social and system. Notions of social conflict impact on and clarify the role and value attached to adult education as an activity in civil society. Adult educators must be careful in appropriating a concept like civil society. Lack of analysis of political economy can lead to uncritical acceptance of ideas that can blind them to the real workings of power in society. Civil society need not be rejected as a theoretical and practical endeavor, but it must be problematized. (Contains 22 references.) (YLB)

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The Political Economy of Civil Society: Implications for Adult and Community Education

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The political economy of civil society: Implications for adult and community education

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Introduction

The previous decade saw civil society coming to the fore in adult education theory and research (Merrifield, 1997; Jackson, 1997; Welton, 1997; Fleming, 1998; Maruatona, 1999). It is championed, in particular, by radical adult educators, who view civil society as the site of radical learning and political struggle. In this regard, radical adult educators fall in line with the contemporary left. It is no coincidence that this debate has developed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the cold war. The elevation of civil society by the European left is the result of a crisis of confidence, one rooted in the troubles afflicting radical politics in general, but particularly socialist/social democratic politics. The failure, perceived or otherwise, of both these interconnected political projects (socialism in the East, social democracy in the West) has elevated civil society to the privileged sphere of radical social change.

> It is the crisis of socialism, as an experience and an ideology, that has prompted this search for alternative concepts. The terms of civil society, its attractive combination of democratic pluralism with a continuing role for state regulation and guidance, make it appear hopeful to societies seeking to recover from the excesses of state socialism; at the same time it seems to offer help in the refashioning of radical politics in those societies where socialism has lost whatever appeal it once possessed (Kumar, 1993, p. 375).

The response of the left to the supposed triumph of capitalism has produced the privileging of civil society as a site of struggle. The differing interpretations on the left of this triumphalism, have produced heated exchanges surrounding the theoretical and political efficacy of civil society. The debate over civil society is one between the Marxist/neo-Marxist oriented left, or socialists, and what has been referred to as the post-Marxist left, which covers an array of thinkers, but who can be collectively described as radical democrats.

The revival of civil society as both a credible force and problematic concept, have been partially reproduced within the theory and practice of radical adult education. Although this debate has impinged on adult education on a surface level, what is missing is a deeper, historical, analysis of these issues. What connections are made between the state, economy and civil society? How do these connections impact on adult educators' understandings of social conflict? The purpose of this paper is to examine these connections and notions of conflict in order to understand differing political objectives at work under the guise of civil society.

Adult Education and Civil Society

Why have some adult educators taken so strongly to the notion of civil society? The theory and practice of radical adult education has long been involved in identifying spaces, whether physical or cultural, where forms of counter-hegemonic learning can take place. Freire's (1998) emphasis on cultural education, Thompson's (1983) women's groups as site of critical awareness, Finger's (1989) valorisation of new social movements – these are some prominent examples of adult educators seizing on something that offers a 'freedom to learn'. Other forms of organisation are rendered less adequate in this regard. Institutions of higher education, chambers of commerce, trade unions, and in particular, formal political parties are

all viewed with suspicion, tainted as they are by connections to the state and the economy. Power and money are the enemies of undistorted forms of learning.

Civil society is now regarded as the site par-excellence for providing this space in which to learn free from power and domination, free from the state and the economy.

> The civil society is the development of the infrastructure within a nation which mediates between the state and its citizens. A strong civil society, which promotes the full participation of its citizens, ensures that we strive towards a participatory democratic goal. It counters the development of a civil society dominated by the powerful interests of the state and those citizens representing a dominant cultural majority. It prevents the marginalisation of less powerful 'sectors' be they based on race, ethnicity, gender or social class (Cunningham, 1992, p. 12).

Also present in this quote is the other reason behind the elevation of civil society - the belief that adult education can play a role in the struggle for a more participatory democracy, a belief in line with the proud tradition of progressive and radical adult education. This tradition is now centred on the notion of civil society as the 'battlefield' of social change. Civil society is seen as providing potential spaces both for learning free from domination and also engagement with social change. It also acts as somewhat of a catch-all phrase for activities such as cultural education, women's groups and new social movements among others. It is no wonder, then, that civil society has so strongly caught the imagination of more radically minded adult educators.

There is another dimension to this recent focus on civil society as a site for learning and social change – the crisis of socialism and social democracy, political movements derived from the Marxist tradition. As the left in general has undergone a major re-thinking of its fundamental tenets, so too has radical adult education. This process of radical re-thinking has established civil society as the new buzz-word of the field. Civil society is viewed as providing a space for democratic practices, practices that can now avoid grandiose notions of social change and offer up more 'self-limiting' approaches to adult education and social change.

> The revolutionary fantasies of the 1960s must give way to a more chastened and modest utopianism: chastened because we have learned that political projects which totally remake 'society' have been disastrous, modestly utopian because one of the big lessons of the twentieth century appears to be that it is utterly catastrophic to human well-being for social learning processes to be constrained within civil society (Welton, 1997, p. 28).

This 'self-limiting' 'chastened and modest utopianism' is critical when attempting to understand the recent championing of civil society. It seems to act for some adult educators as a political 'hedging of the bets' in uncertain times. Calls for a revitalised civil society appear to signify a rejection of Marxism and notions of social change centred on class politics and revolution. But in that case, what do adult educators who valorise civil society stand for? In particular, how do they view the role of adult education in relation to the state and the market?

Examining the debates regarding civil society reveals that it has historically been situated in relation to the state (political society) and the market (economic society). A trawl through these historical debates can provide a platform from which to examine the current interest in civil society, perceptions of the state and the market, and the politics of adult education in these 'post-revolutionary' times.

Such a history incorporates the writings of Cicero, Hobbes and the Scottish moralists Ferguson and Smith (Castiglione, 1994). In this pre-modern, pre-Hegelian phase, three principle actors were identified in the context of civil society: civil society itself, the state and the economy. It is only in the work of Hegel that the basis of modern conceptions of civil society – particularly those of Marx, Gramsci, Habermas and Cohen and Arato – was developed. As Neocleous (1995, p. 396) puts it, Hegel's conception of civil society is an 'essentially modern one, developed as it is in response to the French revolution, the industrial revolution, and the emergence of a sphere of social conflict'. With the French revolution, Hegel viewed a significant development in that it represented a problem close to his heart - the political realisation of freedom. At the same time, with the industrial revolution, there was a development of extremes of poverty and wealth. And connected to this, there was the development of a sphere of private individuals separate from both domestic society (family) and political society (state), essentially a sphere of social conflict. When faced with all these developments and the conceptual problems connected to them, Hegel 'makes the crucial theoretical shift by positing a third dimension 'civil society', standing between the family and the state' (Neocleous, 1995, p. 396).

Hegel's notion of interdependence with civil society does not include the state, but presuppose its existence (Shils, 1991, p. 9). However, while the state is outside civil society, the *economy* is housed within it. According to Shils (1991, p. 5-6), Hegel saw civil society as 'the market, the commercial sector of society and the institutions which were necessary to the functioning of the market and the protection of its members'. What Hegel did was 'recognize the essentially capitalist nature of civil society' (Neocleous, 1995, p. 396). Hegel considered poverty to be a general consequence of civil society and arising necessarily out of it, unless it is governed by a higher power, the state. 'Civil society affords a spectacle of extravagance and want as well as of the physical and ethical degeneration common to them both' (Hegel, 1967, p. 123).

Hegel viewed capitalist modernisation as the cause of this physical and ethical degradation, a development that, on the one hand, created vast quantities of wealth, while on the other, produced a class of people unable to benefit from the freedoms of civil society. This connection between civil society and inequality is at the heart of the modern debate concerning the role (and, just as importantly, the intended role) of civil society. Hegel, although he identified this problem of structural inequality in civil society could provide no real concrete solution. This 'insoluble' problem (Becker, 1994, p. 124) – pauperisation or state control – forms the basis of much of the subsequent debate that has taken place around civil society.

Marxism, post-Marxism and civil society

Marx turned Hegel's conception of civil society and its relation to the state on its head. For Marx, it is not the state that regulates and determines civil society, but the other way round: civil society is the regulator of the state. Civil society is the sphere of class struggle out of which comes its ideological manifestations, in particular, the state. The primary position that Marx gave to civil society contrasted with Hegel's account of the civil society/state relationship: civil society does not pre-suppose the state; the state pre-supposes civil society. For Marx, it was not enough for the state to regulate civil society through law in order to alleviate its structural inequalities a-la Hegel. Civil society does not find its ethical component in the state; rather it finds its *justification*. Bourgeois revolutions, exemplified by the French revolution, do precisely this. 'Political revolution dissolves civil society into its component parts, without revolutionizing and submitting to criticism these parts themselves' (Marx, 1977, p. 56). The solution to the class-based inequality in civil society is not one of an

appeal to the state for regulation but instead the solution comes in the form of taking control of the state itself. As the state provides the legal justification for production and commerce in civil society, it is necessary to seize this power in order to transform civil society.

Antonio Gramsci provided a different twist on civil society to that of Marx or Hegel. Gramsci reversed Marx's base/superstructure model, as he places civil society, not in the base, but in the superstructure (Bobbio, 1979). Both Marx and Gramsci viewed civil society as the focal point for revolutionary action, but their different interpretations over what constitutes civil society have implications for practice. It is at the point of production - the struggles between capital and labour - that Marx believes revolutionary action should be primarily waged. For Gramsci, it is the system of corporations - unions, educational and cultural institutions, voluntary associations - that provide the possibility of a counter-hegemonic revolutionary force. As he puts it (1971, p. 233), the superstructures of civil society 'are like the trench systems of modern warfare'. This difference in content can lead to different political strategies. The Marxist-Leninist variant used the method of a closely-knit disciplined vanguard party that would directly attack the forces of production. In Gramsci's version, the process of revolutionary struggle developed through the mobilization of the grassroots and their subsequent organisation. This is the only major difference between Marx and Gramsci. Fundamental to both theorists is the belief that civil society is intimately connected to capitalism. Capitalism needed to be transformed in order to rid society of its class divisions. Of course, Marx believed that the state had to be overthrown in order to do this, while Gramsci believed in widening civil society until it 'swallowed' the state, but the end goal in both cases, was the same: the overthrow of capitalism. This is significant when considering the present heightened debate over civil society and its beginnings in the 'crisis of socialism'. When it is also understood that the 'concept of civil society most widespread today is fundamentally Gramscian' (Kumar, 1993, p. 389), the civil society debate and the crisis of socialism can start to be connected with post-Marxist theories of civil society that occupy the main sphere of influence in this debate.

Post-Marxist theories of civil society

According to Cohen and Arato, civil society is 'a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication' (1992, p. ix). They view the structure of civil society in much the same way as Gramsci, in that it exists somewhere between economic and political society. Its content is also similar to Gramsci's civil society, in that it corresponds to the system of corporations that Cohen and Arato borrow from Hegel. This expansion of democracy is the main goal of social movements in civil society, an expansion that is possible due to the democratic base provided by the system of corporations housed within.

This democracy is endangered by the system imperatives of both the economy and the state. Cohen and Arato argue that the economy and the state need to be kept at bay within civil society. The problem they identify in the modern world is the increasing *colonisation of the lifeworld* by the functional imperatives of the state and the economy. They borrow this conceptual analysis from Jürgen Habermas (1987), who views the task of left politics in a similar fashion to Cohen and Arato, i.e. to reverse this trend of colonisation. As Cohen and Arato put it (1992, p. 455), 'the project of a democratic civil society ... is obviously one of de-colonizing the lifeworld'.

The role of civil society outlined by Cohen and Arato is quite different to that of Gramsci. Gramsci viewed the problem of modern society to be one of class exploitation and the role of civil society was to develop organisations to eventually take over the state, and hence 'de-class' society. For Cohen and Arato, the problem concerns the colonisation of ethical life by

functional imperatives, and the role of civil society is to 'de-colonise' this ethical life in order to preserve the potential for democratic practices. This difference sets Cohen and Arato apart from the traditional goals of socialism. At the same time, it would be a mistake to label them purely as reconstituted social democrats, although there is enough apparent evidence to suggest this. From a closer reading of their text, it becomes clear that civil society for them is not just an end in itself (a conservative reading) or an instrument of social democratic fine tuning. It is the privileged sphere of what they term a 'self-limiting revolution' (p. 25). They perceive this form of revolution as the (at least partial) solution to problems of structural inequality. Basically, the term signifies a strategy of successive reforms built on the assumptions of liberal democracies, in order to further their goal of democracy. This strategy could be referred to as 'radical liberalism'. The 'self-limiting revolution' they espouse, however, refers to the limits that must be placed on the radicalising of democracy. The traditional aim of socialism - to secure economic democracy - would entail a radical transformation of the structures of capitalism. This is far from the agenda of Cohen and Arato. They argue (1992, p. 147) that their conception of civil society is 'the best way to flesh out this alternative precisely because it explores the limiting point where democratic control remains compatible with economic rationality'. The market in their formulation is to retain its autonomy.

Discussion: civil society, conflict and adult education

This discussion highlights the fact that learning in civil society can have quite distinct objectives. One objective is the traditional socialist objective - the transformation of capitalism. The other objective concerns that of radical democracy - the furtherance of democratic practices. Although it is important to distinguish between these objectives, what is more significant is an awareness of why these are worthwhile objectives in the first place. The traditional socialist objective of transforming capitalism is seen as worthwhile as it will eradicate class divisions. The radical democratic aim of furthering democracy, in the shape of Cohen and Arato at least, is beneficial because it will presumably de-colonise the lifeworld, an objective shared by some adult educators (see Welton's edited volume, 1995).

These aims share a belief that modern society is characterised by conflict, conflict that can be won or lost in the 'trenches' of civil society. Although it could be viewed that the conflict in both is a similar one, as Livesay (1994) believes, i.e. a conflict between ethics and efficiency, this is not the case. Socialists understand the conflict to be one between classes. For radical democrats, the conflict arises between two different forms of societal integration, namely social and system integration. Both socialists and radical democrats can be labelled 'conflict' theorists, understandable given the fact that it is essentially a split between Marxists and post-Marxists.

This paper has been concerned with clarifying historical debates over the civil society/state/economy relationship. But what appears to be the crucial issue in the debate over the politics of civil society, and hence, adult education, is the state/economy relationship. Marxist analyses of civil society are built on political economy, on a belief that the two are interconnected. In the post-Marxist analysis, they are kept separate. The state is neither the epiphenomenon of class struggle nor the site of direct domination. State and economy have their own separate imperatives. Political economy, a traditional Marxist tool for understanding capitalist development, is redundant in the post-Marxist scenario.

There is a need to be careful in appropriating a concept like civil society. The lack of analysis of political economy can lead to an uncritical acceptance of ideas that, although sounding as if they came readymade for adult educators' concern with learning potentials and participation, can blind us to the real workings of power in society, particularly those that come in the shape of the 'state' and 'civil society'. Accepting Gramsci's definition of civil

society, we adult educators work in civil society, regardless of political outlook. There is no need to reject civil society as a theoretical and practical endeavour. There is a need, however, to problematise it. Understanding the political economy of civil society is one important way of moving towards a re-invigorated tradition of radical adult education.

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